

US Policy in Central Asia: Balancing Priorities

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As an organization that monitors and analyzes information about the state of freedom around the world, as well as one that provides direct support to democracy activists and human rights defenders in many parts of the world, Freedom House is able to offer a somewhat unique perspective on the state of democracy and human rights in Central Asia. Our annual series of reports and surveys on global freedom are informed and complemented by the direct experience of our on-ground staff who have been working directly with human rights defenders and journalists in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and until recently Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Looking at a global picture, the expansion of freedom has been on a generally positive trajectory since 1972, when we first launched *Freedom in the World*, our annual survey of political rights and civil liberties around the world. Yet, while the general trend throughout the world has seen more and more countries joining the ranks of the Free and Partly Free countries according to our broad rankings, the countries of Central Asia have for the most part remained Not Free, maintaining fundamental restrictions on political rights and civil liberties, with only one exception.

According to the 2006 edition of *Freedom in the World*, due out this summer, Kyrgyzstan is the only country in Central Asia that has improved its ratings to Partly Free.

And while Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have remained entirely stagnant on their poor rankings, Uzbekistan has slid to the very bottom of our scale, joining Turkmenistan and only six other countries that Freedom House ranks as the world's most repressive regimes (Burma, Cuba, Libya, North Korea, Sudan, and Syria).

I will quickly highlight the key findings in each country, but a more detailed analysis of the current state of political rights and civil liberties in all five countries can be found in the annex to this testimony.

Kyrgyzstan

Freedom in the World ratings for 2005:

Political Rights: 5

Civil Liberties: 4

According to the 2006 edition of *Freedom in the World*, which evaluates the state of freedom during the 2005 calendar year, Kyrgyzstan received a 5 out of a worst possible 7 in political rights and a 4 out of 7 in civil liberties.

The holding of reasonably free and competitive presidential elections in July, and modest improvements in freedom of the media, assembly, and association led Freedom House to upgrade Kyrgyzstan's overall ranking to Partly Free in 2005 for the first time since 1999.

Nonetheless, while Kyrgyzstan may fare better than the rest of the region according to the FIW rankings, but it is still has a far to go before reaching actual "Free" status. Thus, while the March 2005 Tulip Revolution brought improvements in media and civil society freedoms, the country's stability was compromised throughout the year by divisions within the new leadership, a worsening security situation, and questions about whether the new government represented a genuine break from the previous administration.

Kazakhstan

Freedom in the World ratings for 2005:

Political Rights: 6

Civil Liberties: 5

Kazakhstan held its scores of 6 out of a worst 7 in political rights and 5 out of 7 in civil liberties for the year 2005.

During the months preceding the December 4, 2005, presidential election, the Kazakh government intensified pressure on the country's civil society sector through harassment of, and attacks against, opposition activists and independent journalists.

Throughout the year, members of the opposition alliance, For a Just Kazakhstan, faced threats and physical assaults, including the death of one opposition leader and the apparent abduction of another member's daughter. Media outlets were subjected to intense pressures, with several being closed down, others being hit with law suits, and print runs being seized or refused altogether leading up to the election.

The dominant role played by Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan's political life led to a predictably overwhelming victory for the incumbent in an election that most international observers, including the OSCE, found did not meet democratic standards.

While two potentially damaging draft laws to restrict NGO activity put forth by the parliament in June 2005 were ultimately struck down by the Constitutional Council as unconstitutional, the space for civil society to operate remains precarious.

Tajikistan

Freedom in the World ratings for 2005:

Political Rights: 6

Civil Liberties: 5

Tajikistan also held its scores of 6 out of a worst 7 in political rights and 5 out of 7 in civil liberties for the year 2005.

In a pattern similar to the one just documented leading up to the presidential election in Kazakhstan, the overwhelming political dominance of President Rakhmonov's ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Tajikistan ensured it an easy, and essentially uncontested, victory in the February 2005 parliamentary elections.

Much like in Kazakhstan, the government continued to consolidate its power throughout the year by clamping down on the media, closing a printing house and two private television stations, and working to sideline perceived and actual political rivals.

The judiciary is heavily influenced by the executive branch, police frequently conduct arbitrary arrests and beat detainees to extract confessions, and prison conditions are often life threatening due to overcrowding and lack of sanitation.

Turkmenistan

Freedom in the World ratings for 2005:

Political Rights: 7

Civil Liberties: 7

Turkmenistan is a model repressive regime, receiving a lowest possible 7 in both political rights and civil liberties since 1993. President Niyazov continues to enjoy virtually absolute power over all branches and levels of government in Turkmenistan meaning that citizens have absolutely no ability to influence or change their government democratically.

The state security services regularly monitor the activities of citizens and foreign nationals, severely limiting open and free private discussion.

Freedom of speech and the press is severely restricted by the government. Specifically, the government controls all radio and television broadcasts and print media. Reports of dissenting political views are banned, as are even mild forms of criticism of the president. Subscriptions to foreign newspapers and magazines are forbidden, and foreign journalists have few opportunities to visit Turkmenistan.

The judicial system is subservient to the president, who appoints and removes judges for five-year terms without legislative review. The authorities frequently deny rights of due process, including public trials and access to defense attorneys. Police abuse and torture of suspects and prisoners, often to obtain confessions, is widespread.

Uzbekistan

Freedom in the World ratings for 2005:

Political Rights: 7

Civil Liberties: 7

Uzbekistan, as the only Central Asian country to decline in the 2006 *Freedom in the World* ratings, joined Turkmenistan at the bottom of Freedom House's ratings. This downgrade is due to the government's violent suppression of a mass public

demonstration in the city of Andijon in May in which hundreds of largely unarmed civilians were killed and the subsequent crackdown against independent media and the civil society sector.

The aftermath of Andijon has produced an intensified onslaught by the government against independent media, civil society organizations, and human rights activists, particularly those with ties to Western governments or groups regarded as posing a potential challenge to the regime.

Within the past six months, Uzbekistan has also closed the local offices of the Eurasia Foundation, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, ABA CEELI, and Freedom House claiming that the organizations were disrupting the country's internal affairs and citing as proof last year's demonstrations in Andijan. Some 200 domestic nonprofit organizations have also been forced to shut down.

Recommendations:

So, given this relatively bleak picture, what can be done?

First, we should recognize that outside influences do affect the behavior of these governments. Some of them serve to embolden authoritarian behavior and others can serve to deter backsliding and promote democratic progress. Russia's own decline into a not-free country and its reassertion of interest in the region provides these governments with examples of laws and practices to increase control over civil society and repress media and political opposition, typically under the guise of national security.

At the same time, our own sustained engagement can and does have a great influence on these countries, as seen in some of the examples I will provide. Pressure by the U.S. government and the presence of international organization has helped to improve human rights and fundamental freedoms of association and speech in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan and the U.S. needs to ensure continuing support for courageous human rights defenders throughout the region. Protection and expansion of human rights has to be at the centerpiece of all democracy efforts – not something seen as peripheral or marginal. We have been dismayed that faced with budget cuts USAID has signaled its willingness to cut human rights programs first. This is a major strategic mistake. If not for the local advocacy efforts of over 100 civil society groups in Kazakhstan combined with international pressure, a much restrictive NGO law would have been enacted last year. Without the reporting of arrests, detentions, law suits, and administrative actions against political opposition, independent media outlets, and human rights defenders, many of these activists and organizations would remain in jail or afraid to raise their concerns, as is increasingly the case in repressive Uzbekistan.

Secondly, we need to address the need for free flow of information around the region. The private printing press in Kyrgyzstan, supported by the US Government, proved as a critical element in holding open free debate and free press during the transition in Kyrgyzstan. Just as important is the role of radio and TV broadcasting, and we should

look to how these critical outlets can be broadcast into Uzbek and other areas. The US needs to back such efforts, including fully condemning the pressure against RFE/RFL local journalists and operations.

Thirdly, we need to facilitate more cross border linkages among democracy activists, human rights defenders, nascent think tanks, and free press. Together they will have a larger voice within regional and international fora, including the OSCE. The capacity of activists varies greatly across the region. With the help of activists in its neighboring countries, Uzbek activists might be assured that someone will transfer what is happening in their country to regional and international forums and that democracy and human rights does not fall outside of arrangements, agreements, and regional development.

We recognize that our sustained engagement means difficult policy positions of the U.S. government and our allies. The U.S. government should be commended for its stand on human rights in Uzbekistan. The willingness to unequivocally call for an international investigation into the terrible events of Andijon should be praised.

However, since that time, we believe that U.S. policy needs to be further clarified with regard to relations between our countries. The U.S. has not even gone so far as the EU in imposing travel sanctions. We therefore urge the USG to adopt further measures, including targeted sanctions, that make it clear that (1) we think that the Uzbek government and its financial and other backers are making the wrong decisions about the direction of the country and (2) make clear to others in the country that the U.S. is still interested in supporting the Uzbek people, especially those struggling for the right to engage in universally accepted rights. The U.S. government needs to demonstrate that it has not abandoned those on the ground, despite the restrictions on foreign organizations like Freedom House.

Finally, the struggle for democracy in Kyrgyzstan is not over. As the country reviews its own way forward, there are concerns about media freedom, corruption, and needed constitutional reforms. The U.S. should provide support to the government led by President Bakiyev, but it should not do so unconditionally. There are reform minded elements within the KG regime, however, the country is increasingly unstable and may backslide. If KG does not continue down the path of general reform the lesson Central Asia is taking from the Tulip revolution is democracy that brings instability and chaos. There are reformers in KG that we should invest in, while at the same time, support watchdog groups and coalitions like Voice of Freedom who can effectively provide checks and balance on powers and advocate for legislative change.

With sustained engagement, particularly on the issues of human rights, and support to those that defend these rights and keep open an operating environment for citizens to exercise their rights, the US can be the positive influence which counteracts both internal authoritarian tendencies and the repressive examples of neighboring countries.